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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a larger project which explored the impact of writing across institutional boundaries via e-mail on freshman students enrolled in several schools and universities located in Tennessee--Bryan College, Columbia State Community College, and Middle Tennessee State University. The paper explains that in addition to their regular peer groups, for this project, the students were also assigned to electronic peer groups, and rather than meeting for face-to-face reading of essays, students had to e-mail their essays to members of their group and respond to the essays of their peers by reply message. The paper reports the findings regarding the manner in which this process affected student perceptions of each other and themselves over the course of the project. It includes the students' comments and remarks on their experiences during the project. The paper states that requiring students to write across institutional boundaries to enhance audience awareness was, in the opinion of the project collaborators, a success. It cites agreement among the writing instructors guiding the project that audience adaptation is one of the most sophisticated aspects of effective writing and the hardest to learn--they were pleased to see evidence of that adaptation in their students' writing. (NKA)

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# Crossing Institutional Boundaries: Making Audience Real

Raymond E. Legg

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1

CS 510 533

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**Collaborative Teaching, Collaborative Learning: Expanding Communities of Writing**

**Teachers and Students Cross Institutional Boundaries**

**Conference on College Composition and Communication**

**Denver, Colorado**

**15 March 2001**

## III. Crossing Institutional Boundaries: Making Audience Real

This paper is part of a larger project which explored the impact of writing across institutional boundaries via e-mail on Freshman students enrolled in four schools located in Tennessee. Those schools were Bryan College (a Christian liberal arts college in Dayton, TN: 600 students), Columbia State Community College (Columbia, TN: 4500 students), and Middle Tennessee State University (Murfreesboro, TN: 19,000 students). In addition to their regular peer groups, for this project, the students were also assigned to electronic peer groups. Rather than meeting for face-to-face reading of essays, students had to e-mail their essays to members of their group and respond to the essays of their peers by reply message. What follows is a report of our findings regarding how this process affected student perceptions of each other and themselves over the course of the project. The students were allowed to comment on their experiences during the project and some of their remarks are included below.

As part of the assignment for this project, students were told, "assume that your target readers are first-year college students at Bryan College, Columbia State Community College, and Middle Tennessee State University who are unfamiliar with the subject of your profile."[1] As I presented the assignment to my class, I did so noting

[1] This information was recorded on the essay coversheet required that students identify topic, audience, writer's role, thesis, etc.

especially how they received the idea of audience awareness behind it because I wanted to measure their initial responses against comments they were to make as the project came to an end. When the project was concluded, what we discovered about audience awareness in the writing of our students was consistent with my initial considerations, uniform in its application, and, not surprising, typical of college freshman.

When I say consistent with my initial considerations I mean several things. During our first face-to-face planning meeting, we instructors made several general observations which were borne out over the course of the project. First, we believed that our students would, for the most part, be forced to think more precisely about to whom they were writing. They were, after all, given a target audience, and they had to affirm their awareness of that audience on the essay coversheet. The degree to which they were successful was typical in that their responses concerning audience varied from off the mark entirely (the ever-vague "Those that are looking for something that is not temporary") to the only slightly off ("My target readers are MTSU College students and community members that may have never heard of this restaurant. Additionally, they may be new to the community, a visitor, or prospective students. They should be 18 or older.") Included also were the slightly more precise ("My target readers are primarily college students (from our assigned peer groups), ranging from age 18-27, of any race, both male and female, located in TN,") and the very accurate ("My target readers are first year college students at Bryan College, Columbia State [sic] University, and Middle Tennessee State University").

But there were also those students who specifically adapted their essays to the targeted audience as we envisioned they should. As Ayne Cantrell, Chair of our project noted,

> one student wrote, 'The Front Porch is the perfect place for a college student to have a break, have some lunch, or take a date.' This writer saw a local restaurant in Murfreesboro from the college student's point of view, as does another who said, 'One aspect that might appeal to students away from home is the friendly feel of the Cafe.'

She saw, too, "how another student zeroes in on the targeted audience asking: 'As a college student, have you ever wondered where to go if you got sick? At Middle Tennessee State University. . . their [sic] is the McFarland Health Services Department.'" As we suspected, the students in our groups spanned wide range of audience awareness in their writing.

Second, we believed that communicating via e-mail would affect the ways in which students related to each other. It did. Initially, and somewhat surprisingly, many of the students formed preconceived notions about the members of their peer group based solely on e-mail aliases. In my class, one student commented, "Boy, this will be great. I have a *Princess* in my group," and others followed saying things like, "Well, I have a '*wildkitty*' or a '*BooGirl*' in my group." I required my students to use their institutional e-mail address for two reasons: (1) to get them used to using the system and (2) because it would be easier to communicate with them using a distribution list on our network. Upon reflection, it seems that this was a good decision. It seems to have kept them from being prejudged by peer group members.

But communicating via e-mail had other effects on the students as well. One wrote,

> My internet peer group was challenging when sending essays and responding to them several at a time but, they all responded and I got some good advice. One of my members . . . was especially helpful, because she gave a lot of good advice about fixing certain areas in my paper which initialy [sic] made it sound and flow a lot better. I was surprised because I thought the whole 'internet peer group' would not work and people wouldn't respond, but we all did our part, and I think we have all helped each other a little bit.

Another said, "I found simply having feedback from people I didn't know and couldn't see to be helpful. I felt I was getting "straight-up" feedback without the overall "politeness" found in peer groups conducted in person." Finally, a different student wrote,

> Collaborating with the peers from [the other schools] taught me that my writing was not bad but just need [sic] a few little adjustments. In addition, another thing that I learned is that their papers were just as good as mine and not expertly written.

From these comments it becomes clear that our observations about the students were accurate. This last student is typical of many who perceived their writing to be inferior especially when compared with that of students from other schools. The students at MTSU and Columbia State, for example, initially felt that the Bryan students would be much better writers because they attend a private school. In the end they discovered

the inaccuracy of their observation. On the whole though, many of the students felt, as one put it, that, "The students at the other schools showed me the difference in writing styles and that my style and interests are different from theirs. I felt like our papers, as a class was stronger than what the students at the other schools wrote." While not all of the comments about the project were positive, on the whole, the negative observations tended to be concerned with the technical aspects of the process rather than matters of audience awareness.

Interesting also is the uniform way in which students involved in the project saw their opinions of their peers change over the course of the writing process. For example, an MTSU student wrote, "I was also surprised how one of my peers was from Nigeria, but is going to a Christian college in Tennessee. She seemed like a normal, interesting person." Similarly, a Bryan student wrote,

> I did not expect the students from MTSU and CSCC to evaluate my essay so intensely. When I began revising my essay, the comments they made showed me a lot of mistakes I would have otherwise overlooked. The peer evaluations did help me a lot. I believe that the electronic peer group idea is a good one.

Another said, "I really appreciate my peers' responses. They were very straightforward and factual. They were also able [to] see some mistakes and how to correct. I felt proud when both of my peers commented on the quality of my essay."

Especially important here, are the comments made by the students at Columbia State Community College. One wrote, "I enjoyed getting to know both of my peer group members and telling them about myself. [. . .] Collaborating with other students taught

me that even though someone is critical about your writing, they are just trying to help you do better in writing a paper." Another said, "I never consider myself a fabulous writer but at least now I have a little more confidence in what I write. I also learned about two new places. Both seem worth visiting. All in all, I really enjoyed this expierence [sic]." Finally, another CSCC student demonstrates the positive aspects of broadening his perception of audience. He wrote:

> What surprised me from this experience is that the two-year community college, four-year private college, and the four-year public college really do not differ in the academics. I figured that the four-year institutions would have had a more difficult class than we do. I guess that I assumed that because they have more students, and the students would not be coached as good by the teachers. This writing experience showed me that really, I am not below the average writer.

Many of the students felt the same way. They may have expressed it in different terms but their conclusion was the same. Looking at their writing from the vantage point of a larger audience was a positive, self-affirming experience. Being the only member of our team who has taught in all three settings, I suspected this would happen because I have seen it time and time again. The students at the Community College generally feel somewhat deficient when compared to their peers in other schools. I was happy to see that myth dispelled at least in the minds of some of the students.

Finally, this project revealed that the students were in most ways typical of college freshmen who must, often for the first time, consider to whom they are writing and that they are relatively insecure about their ability to write well. For example, one

student wrote, "This helped me to see what level my writing was on, and how it compared to the level of these other students. I feel a little more confident now in my writing because I am on the same level as these students." And from another we read, "The over all [sic] experience was quite different, but the difference is what made it unique and fun. I enjoyed writing this essay and getting responses from others outside my peer group." It appears that communicating across institutional boundaries, according to one student "taught me that my writing was not bad but just need [sic] a few little adjustments. In addition, another thing that I learned is that their papers were just as good as mine and not expertly written." Again, it seems that there was a general perception of inadequacy on the part of some of the students which was dispelled by this project.

There were also those for whom audience was most real and "from whom we get a [true] sense that they are writing to college students" outside their own sphere of activity. These were the ones whose

> essays [explicitly adapted] to audience by naming place (writing, 'Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is full of inviting and affordable restaurants'), by locating their subject in context of college life (saying, 'Every college has something to offer that causes it to stand out and be unique'; and again, 'College students who live away from home would enjoy the fine southern food at Miller's because it may be seldom that they get a home cooked meal at an appealing price'). . . .

And there were also those who were [particularly] aware of the prejudices their readers may hold aginst them for one reason or another. One wrote, "Most people think that

when students come to Bryan College they will never have a life because there is nothing to do in Dayton" [and a second remarked] "Even though Bryan college has a small campus and is located in a small town, it can still make a difference in the world."

This project gave students an opportunity to look at their world and themselves through the eyes of an outsider and for the most part they succeeded. Would they have otherwise? Probably. But it is certain that they did for our project and that change in perspective, we hope, made a difference which they will carry throughout their writing careers.

Requiring students to write across institutional boundaries to enhance audience awareness was, in our opinion, a success. It accomplished our goals and confirmed our belief that it would be a positive experience. Though not all of the students would agree (there were numerous negative comments), the overall reaction to the project was positive. In the words of one student,

> I believe that the electronic peer group idea is a good one. The whole experience has taught me much that I did not see before about my writing. It [showed] me that I need to put more thought into my essay before I actually write it. I did not expect students from secular colleges to actually do this assignment well. I thought they would blow it off after I did not receive any responses, but when the responses came I was shocked. I would not mind doing something like this again. I believe this is a good way to see just how good [or] bad my writing is [while] at the same time interacting with different people that I would otherwise not meet. It was an excellent learning experience for me.

As writing instructors guiding the project I think we would agree. Audience adaptation, to us, is one of the most sophisticated aspects of effective writing and the hardest to learn, so we were pleased to see evidence of that adaptation in the writing of our students.

Those interested in reading the full texts of the students essays submitted during this project may do so by visiting their web site entitled "Not Quite Shakespeare, But It Will Do" located at http://www.mtsu.edu/~mclayton/Studentcomps/.